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SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO FINDS A NEW FRIEND IN HUGO CHAVEZ

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¶1. Summary: On July 23-25, Lukashenko hosted Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in Minsk, marking the first official visit of a Latin American leader in Belarus' history. During the series of meetings and ceremonies, the leaders lauded each other's political and economic policies and occasionally shared criticism of their common enemy, the U.S. The state media's extensive coverage portrayed Chavez as an important world leader and his visit as a significant milestone for Belarus' influence in Latin America. The "strategic partnership" the two leaders signed called for increased cooperation in science, agriculture, and petroleum spheres and for the development of a Venezuelan-Belarusian commission responsible for creating joint projects. Although the agreements on bilateral trade did not differ much from those Belarus makes with other "friendly" nations in the Middle East and Africa, Chavez's strikingly similar style of government has paved the way for increased bilateral cooperation for each other's political and economic policies. End Summary.

The Brothers Meet

¶2. In the evening of July 23, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez arrived in Minsk for a three-day visit (although a day later than scheduled) to a red carpet welcome with military fanfare and was greeted by Prime Minister Sergey Sidorsky and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Martinov. On July 24 at the Presidential Administration, which was clad in Venezuelan and Belarusian flags, an eager President Aleksandr Lukashenko greeted Chavez with an emotional handshake and an awkward hug. After standing at attention to both countries' national anthems and watching soldiers march past, Lukashenko and Chavez began their negotiations in a "one on one" conversation in which they praised each other's leadership. Chavez told Lukashenko he had come to Belarus to express Venezuela's solidarity with Lukashenko and thanked Belarus for supporting Venezuela's government. He expressed to Lukashenko his happiness to be in Belarus and claimed his goal was to form a "pact of unity" with his new friend Lukashenko and to "lay the foundation stone" for future relations. Lukashenko noted there were many opportunities for a partnership and no closed topics between Belarus and Venezuela.

¶3. Lukashenko and Chavez later held a roundtable discussion with Lukashenko's top cabinet members and Chavez's delegation. Lukashenko praised Chavez's "extensive knowledge" of Venezuelan and Belarusian economics and defense and expressed happiness that Venezuela was ready to establish bilateral agreements with Belarus. Chavez lauded Lukashenko for averting a color revolution, claiming that "they" [the U.S.] also try to create such revolutions in Venezuela and stressed that multi-polarity would save the world from madness, Nazism, warfare, aggression, and color revolutions. Lukashenko responded, adding that media outlets [controlled by the

West] distort the actual situation in a country and misrepresent their heads of state. Chavez went further stating that Venezuelans and their Belarusian "friends and brothers" would not be "deceived" or "colonized" and would defend citizens' interests from those of the "demonic capitalists." [Note: Before arriving in Belarus, Chavez told reporters that he and Lukashenko share a common enemy.]

A Strategic Partnership Signed

¶4. At the end of the negotiations, Chavez and Lukashenko signed a joint declaration for a long-term "strategic partnership" in sciences, technologies, energy, and petrochemicals that included provisions for bilateral consultations between Belarusian and Venezuelan ministries and parliaments on scientific, technical, and agriculture innovation. The partnership also called for the creation of a Belarusian-Venezuelan high-level commission that would develop bilateral projects in the economic, scientific, technical, and energy spheres. [Note: Lukashenko's Presidential Administration later that day announced that Head of Belarus' Security Council Viktor Sheiman would co-chair the commission.] Chavez, interested in improving Venezuelan agriculture and house construction, noted he would like to import Belarusian trucks, tractors, and fertilizers and other Belarusian equipment. Belarus' technology, according to Chavez, would help Venezuela quickly modernize its industry. Chavez also indicated that Venezuela was ready to purchase Belarusian extraction and refining equipment to develop Venezuela's oil industry and increase imports of Belarusian potash fertilizer.

In Honor of Bolivar

¶5. On July 25, Lukashenko held a ceremony for Chavez at the Military Academy in honor of the birthday of Venezuela's hero, Simon Bolivar. Lukashenko told Chavez it was a great honor to

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share in the celebration of Venezuela's "great son" on Belarusian land. He lauded Venezuela for choosing its own path to freedom and independence and for creating economic and political conditions that secure Venezuela's sovereignty. Lukashenko expressed thanks to the Venezuelan people for its contribution to the anti-Nazi campaign in WWII and hoped Belarusian-Venezuelan relations would be long term. According to Lukashenko, both countries share the same interest in securing a higher standard of living, maintaining national security, and developing the economy. Lukashenko again castigated the West and U.S. for their "unprecedented" pressure and attempts to force Belarus and Venezuela to adopt "alien ideology and morals" and "pseudo-economic reforms." The Belarusian President commented that the West accuses countries like Belarus and Venezuela of abusing human rights and hindering democracy simply because their countries refused to accept the West's model of development and chose to build their home without "foreign architects and contractors." Lukashenko said each state has a right to follow the course chosen by its people and Belarus and Venezuela would defend this "sacred" right by all available means.

¶6. Chavez expressed satisfaction with the strategic alliance Belarus and Venezuela had formed during his visit and added to Lukashenko's scathing of the U.S. Chavez reiterated that it was vital for Venezuela and Belarus to resist internal and external threats and defend their political and economic course, which are efficient and aimed at creating a multi-polar world. He accused the U.S. and "certain" historians of describing the 20th century as "America's Century" in an attempt to erase history. Chavez remarked that the 20th century was one of great revolutions. After the Soviet Union's collapse, the U.S. declared capitalism and the free market economy as the victors over socialism and the sovereignty of nations and tried to expand its hegemony and empire over Belarus and Venezuela. Chavez added that sovereignty and socialism would never die.

GOB Hopes For South American Business

17. PM Sidorsky told reporters at the airport following Chavez's departure for Moscow that Venezuela and Belarus would start joint projects in the construction sector and that Belarusian experts would soon be sent to Venezuela. First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko noted that Venezuela and Belarus in 2007 would boost trade to USD 1 billion and develop large projects in oil production and fertilizers. [Note: Trade with Venezuela in 2005 totaled USD 15.5 million, but only USD 6,000 by the end of the first half of 2006.] According to Semashko, oil refined in the western hemisphere is sold at USD 485-490 per ton, which would bring a large profit for Belarusian-refined crude from Russia. Semashko also expected Belarus to increase its potash fertilizer exports to Venezuela ten-fold to 500,000 tons per year and create a joint-project factory in Venezuela that would produce fertilizers.

Comment

18. The state media provided endless coverage of Chavez's visit to Belarus, showing pictures of Lukashenko and Chavez embracing each other under such headlines as "Friendship From The Heart" and "Axis Of Kindness And Creation." Lukashenko could not hide his happiness to host Chavez, the first South American leader in Belarus and Lukashenko's brother-in-arms against the U.S. Head of State visits to Minsk, including those from the CIS, are rare for Lukashenko, so each one is considered a holiday for the GOB. The agreements reached between Belarus and Venezuela do not differ from previous agreements made between Belarus and pariah states like Iran, Syria, and Sudan. The GOB did not hide its interest in finding a place in Venezuela's oil industry or using the country as a springboard for expanding Belarusian exports to other South American countries. More importantly, Lukashenko found a friend in Chavez, whose behavior mirrored that of Lukashenko's, and the Belarusian leader will likely accept Chavez's invitation to visit Venezuela in the near future.

PHLIPOT